

Essays on Cajuns & Creoles

by Shane K. Bernard



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“Of Cajuns and Creoles: A Brief Historical Analysis”
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“Notes on the Birth of Cajun Ethnic Identity”
Published September 2020

“Thoughts on Cajuns and ‘Whiteness’”
Published September 2020

“Born of ‘Elite’ White Reactionism?: Assessing Claims
about the Rise of Cajun Ethnicity”
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Cullen Bryant, *The Lower Mississippi* (New York: D. Appleton and
Co., 1872).

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FOREWORD

I wrote the four essays herein between 2019 and 2022 to address certain current issues in Cajun and Creole studies. These essays originally appeared, and still appear, on my personal blog, *Bayou Teche Dispatches* (<https://bayoutechedispatches.blogspot.com>). A collection of over fifty essays — some more or less academic than others — they cover a range of topics touching on south Louisiana history and culture.

I prepared the four select works in this booklet not only as a historian, but as someone who identifies as both a Cajun and a Creole. As I note in one of these essays, “[M]any of my ancestors were Creoles of French heritage. My own family tree abounds with tell-tale Creole surnames: de la Morandière, Soileau, de la Pointe, Fuselier de la Claire, Brignac, Bordelon, de Livaudais, and others. . . . As such, I could, if I chose to do so (and sometimes I do), identify as Creole — doubly so because Cajuns themselves are to begin with a kind of Creole.”

It is my hope these essays will somehow, in their own small way, assist the field of Cajun and Creole studies by engaging in, and spurring on, the marketplace of competing ideas — which is, after all, how scholarship works or ought to work.

I trust those with whom I express disagreement will accept this critique in the collegial spirit I intend.

Shane K. Bernard
New Iberia, Louisiana
April 2024



"The matter almost demands a Venn diagram for clarity."

OF CAJUNS AND CREOLES: A BRIEF HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

I thank Dr. Barry Jean Ancelet, Dr. Carl A. Brasseaux, Dr. David Cheramie, independent researcher Don Arceneaux, and former CODOFIL president Warren A. Perrin for proofing the below essay.

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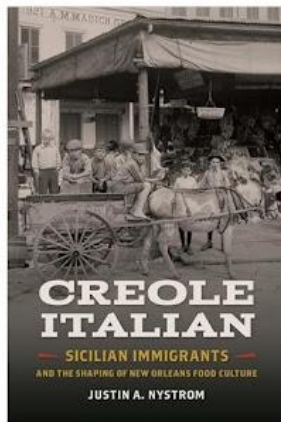
I have observed a growing effort, particularly among south Louisiana's Creole population, to rein in use of the word *Cajun* to describe all things French in Louisiana. (I mean *Creole* in the broadest sense of the word: *Creole* devoid of racial connotations and thus applying equally to persons who are black, white, or multiracial. *Creole* meaning "Native to Louisiana" or a bit more narrowly "Native to south Louisiana, and of Roman Catholic and French- or Spanish-speaking heritage.")

I concur with this effort: *things that are not Cajun should not be called Cajun.*

Implicit in the critique of *Cajun* as a blanket term for all south Louisiana culture is an assertion that Creole history and culture should be acknowledged more frequently and more substantively. This means, for example, that scholars should conduct more research into Creoles; that the tourism industry should highlight more Creole history and more Creole attractions; and that what is Creole should be identified as Creole, not as Cajun.

I support all these notions, for while I self-identify as Cajun, many of my ancestors were Creoles of French heritage. My own family tree abounds with tell-tale Creole surnames: de la Morandière, Soileau, de la Pointe, Fuselier de la Claire, Brignac, Bordelon, de Livaudais, and others.

As such, I could, if I chose to do so (and sometimes I do), identify as Creole — doubly so because Cajuns themselves are to begin with *a kind of Creole*. After all, are they not, as I describe Creoles above, *native to south Louisiana and of Roman Catholic and French-speaking heritage?*



“It is interesting to note, for example, that in 2018 the University of Georgia Press issued a book titled *Creole Italian: Sicilian Immigrants and the Shaping of New Orleans Food Culture*.”

I view Cajuns, however, as merely one type of Creole among several other types of Creoles. These types include black Creoles, white Creoles, multiracial Creoles, French Creoles, Spanish Creoles,

German Creoles, and perhaps still other types of Creoles who occupy part of Louisiana's complex cultural landscape. (It is interesting to note, for example, that in 2018 the University of Georgia Press issued a book titled *Creole Italian: Sicilian Immigrants and the Shaping of New Orleans Food Culture*.) And then there are other types of Creoles in other states, other nations, and even on other continents. (I once used the word *Creole* while lecturing in front of a group of Brazilian tourists in south Louisiana. They gasped in horror, telling me that in their country *Creole* is equivalent to America's most dreaded racial slur. They actually referred to the Portuguese version of *Creole*, which is *crioulo*. The reliable Wikitionary.org backs up their claim; see its entry for *crioulo*.)

In other words, Cajuns are to me a subset of Creoles, just as, say, Cherokees are a subset of Native Americans, Ashkenazim are a subset of Jews, and Mexicans are a subset of Latinos. But this does not mean Cajuns do not view themselves as distinct from other Creoles. They clearly do and arguably have done so since their origin as an ethnic group. Sociologist Jacques Henry of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, for example, has observed, "The definition of Cajun ethnicity has been on-going since the arrival of Acadian exiles in Louisiana. It has taken place amidst the economic, social and cultural changes that have happened since the eighteenth century."⁽¹⁾

Cajuns have not been in Louisiana as long as other types of Creoles. However, the Cajuns' common ancestors, the Acadians — forcibly expelled by the British military from what are now the Maritime Provinces of Canada — arrived in Louisiana beginning in 1764. By the late 1800s those exiles and their offspring had intermarried heavily with other south Louisiana ethnic groups (settlers of French, German, Spanish, even to some extent Anglo and Scots-Irish heritage) and become "Cajuns." Thus, for example, R. L. Daniels wrote in 1879 of the word "Acadian — or rather its corruption 'Cajun' as they pronounce it."⁽²⁾ In 1893 Julian Ralph similarly observed that Acadians were "spoken of in their own country . . . as 'Cajuns.'" And in 1898 a journalist aptly noted, "[A] large element of the French population of the state are . . . Acadians,

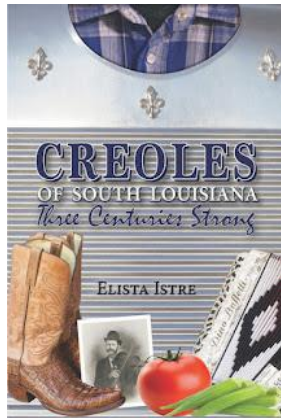


The expulsion of the Cajuns' Acadian ancestors from Nova Scotia, 1755.
(Source: William Cullen Bryant, Sidney Howard Gay, Noah Brooks, *Scribner's Popular History of the United States*, Vol. 3 [NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896])

or, *as they call themselves and are generally called, 'Cajuns'*" [my italics].⁽³⁾

UL sociologist Henry thus concludes, "[B]y the turn of the [20th] century, Cajuns/*cadiens* are a group symbolically discrete. . . . [and] a breed apart."⁽⁴⁾ Cajun historian Carl Brasseaux echoes this view, stating, "[T]he Acadians [in Louisiana] were by 1803 on the threshold of a new and significant period of socioeconomic change, one that would transform them . . . into Louisiana Cajuns."⁽⁵⁾ He continues this theme elsewhere, averring that by the end of Reconstruction in 1877, "[A]scriptive [i.e., attributed] distinctions between Acadians and neighboring groups had become blurred, giving rise to the creation of a new people — the Cajuns."⁽⁶⁾

If I myself sometimes gloss over the complex relationship of Cajuns to Creoles, it is because I find it less confusing for the uninitiated if I avoid explaining, "And, oh, by the way, *Cajuns are Creoles.*" (The matter almost demands a Venn diagram for clarity.) This may be one reason most Cajuns have chosen *not* to identify as *both* Cajuns and Creoles: besides the fact that most Cajuns simply do not think of themselves of Creoles, there is widespread confusion and debate about the very meaning of *Creole*, even among south Louisiana natives.



Elista Istre's recent volume
about Creole history, from the
University of Louisiana Press, Lafayette, La.

Ultimately, there is only so much one can do — or ought to do, I would assert — about people choosing to self-identify as members of one ethnic group or another. According to U.S. census data, for example, there were in 2020 an estimated 100,000+ people across America who self-identified their ancestry as “Cajun.”⁽⁷⁾ If self-identification as “Cajun,” or as a member of any ethnic group, is good enough for the U.S. Census Bureau, it is good enough for me. It is evidently good enough for most scholars, few if any of whom would presume to tell anyone what they should or should not call themselves in terms of ethnicity.

As a historian I believe my role is to observe, chronicle, and interpret, and to do so as objectively as possible. To involve oneself too closely, too personally with a living subject of study like an ethnic group — such as by seeking to change that group's behavior — is to relinquish objectivity and to cross into the realm of activism. And while activism in itself can be a rewarding pursuit, I do not believe it mixes well with scholarship. Granted, complete objectivity is possible only in theory, but the very quest for objectivity can elevate the quality of research and analysis to a higher, more refined level. It can do so by guiding researchers

around pitfalls like wishful thinking and what the historical profession calls *filiopieté* (or *filiopietism*), a fancy term for “ancestor worship.” Such weaknesses can result in misunderstanding or, worse, deification of those who came before us — at the expense of their humanity.

Notes

(1) Jacques Henry, “From *Acadien* to *Cajun* to *Cadien*: Ethnic Labelization and Construction of Identity,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 17 (Summer, 1998): 56.

(2) *Ibid.*, 34.

(3) “The ‘Cajuns of Louisiana,” *Wood County Reporter* (Grand Rapids, Wisc.) [reprinted from the *Dallas (Tex.) News*], 2 June 1898, 8.

(4) Henry, “Ethnic Labelization,” 39.

(5) Carl A. Brasseaux, *The Founding of New Acadia: The Beginnings of Acadian Life in Louisiana, 1765-1803* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 198.

(6) _____, *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803-1877* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), xi.

(7) “Cajun,” People Reporting Ancestry, 2020: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables (B04006), Total U.S. Population, data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=United%20States&t=Ancestry&tid=ACSDT5Y2020.B04006, accessed 2 May 2021

Selected Readings on Creoles

This list makes no pretense of completeness. There are many other noteworthy sources about the subject.

Shane K. Bernard. “Creoles.” In *Encyclopedia of Louisiana* (<https://64parishes.org>), ed. David Johnson. Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Article published 8 December 2010, <https://64parishes.org/entry/creoles>.

_____. "Creole." In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 6: Ethnicity*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Carl A. Brasseaux, Keith P. Fontenot, and Claude F. Oubre. *Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country*. Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

James H. Dormon, ed. *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*. Knoxville, Tenn.: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996.

Elista Istre. *Creoles of South Louisiana: Three Centuries Strong*. Lafayette, La.: University of Louisiana Press, 2018.

Gary B. Mills. *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977.

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. Louisiana State University Press, 1992.

Sybil Kein, ed. *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000.

Joseph G. Tregle. "Creoles and Americans." In *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, 131-85. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992.

_____. "On That Word 'Creole' Again: A Note." *Louisiana History*, 23 (Spring 1982): 193-98.





"Cajun children on Terrebonne Project," June 1940.
(Marion Post Wolcott, [Library of Congress](#))

NOTES ON THE BIRTH OF CAJUN ETHNIC IDENTITY

I thank Dr. Barry Jean Ancelet, Dr. David Cheramie, independent researcher Don Arceneaux, and former CODOFIL president Warren A. Perrin for proofreading the below essay.



I have noticed claims that Cajun ethnic identity did not originate until the late twentieth century — more particularly, that it did not emerge until the mid- to late 1960s. It arose at that time, some assert, merely as a negative response to the Black civil rights movement. It has also been claimed the very word *Cajun* did not appear, at least not in print, until the mid-twentieth century (implying, oddly, the ethnic label came before the ethnic identity).

These assertions, it seems to me, are unfounded. Perhaps they stem from confusing *the birth of Cajun identity* with *the birth of*

Cajun pride. The Cajun pride movement did in fact begin in the 1960s — but that is not the same as the birth of Cajun ethnic identity. Or perhaps these misconceptions arise from conflating the birth of Cajun identity with two other late-twentieth-century events. One happened in 1980, when a U.S. federal court declared Cajuns to be a bona fide ethnic group protected by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The second event occurred a few years later, when geneticists discovered a common Cajun genotype — scientific evidence that Cajuns are, by virtue of tell-tale DNA, a distinct ethnic group.⁽¹⁾

Genetic and judicial considerations aside, Cajun ethnic identity, I maintain, existed well before the late twentieth century. An abundance of historical proof supports this perspective, so much so, in fact, it prompts the question: If Cajun identity and even the word *Cajun* did not exist until, as claimed, relatively recently, why then is it so easy to find earlier — indeed, much earlier — references to that word and the identity it signifies? And not merely a few, but numerous references?



The Troy (N.Y.) Record, 21 July 1943.

For example, if we survey evidence from the World War II era, we find Cajuns mentioned in a 1942 syndicated newspaper article titled "Cajun Chefs Help Prepare U.S. Army Mess in London." (Yes, *London*.) The piece featured Cajun mess-hall cooks with surnames like Marx, Gateaux, Borque (Bourque), Carrier, and Guidry (names generally considered Cajun in south Louisiana,

whether of Acadian origin or not). “Most of these men,” explained Sergeant Marx of Crowley, referring to his kitchen staff in wartime London, “are Cajun French . . . and hardly any of them could speak English when they enlisted.” One cook, Private Freddie Guidry — referring to his own 6-foot-1-inch, 242-pound frame — quipped boastfully to the reporter, “Cajuns always do things in a big way.”(2)

Interestingly, a few wartime images even show airplane “nose art” bearing the word *Cajun*. For example, the nickname *Cajun Queen* was painted on not one, but two B-29 bombers flown by a U.S. aircrew in the Pacific. Similarly, *Cajun Coonass* appeared on the fuselage of a C-47 transport plane in New Guinea. (Incidentally, that nickname is one of the earliest known uses of the controversial term *coonass* – see my blog article about this subject).(3)

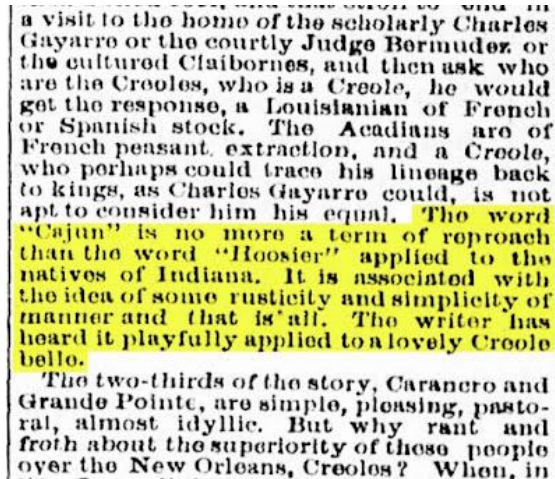


The *Cajun Queen* B-29 bomber,
Pacific campaign, World War II.
(Author's Collection)

Jumping farther back in time to the late nineteenth century, we find numerous references to *Cajun* as an ethnic group and an ethnic label. For instance, an 1898 article in *The Indianapolis Journal* (originally printed in *The Dallas News*) not only used the word *Cajun*, but did so in reference to a people it considered distinct from Creoles. “[A] large element of the French population of the State [of Louisiana] are not creoles [*sic*],” averred the paper's

unnamed journalist, “but Acadians, or, as they call themselves and are generally called, ‘Cajuns.’”(4)

A decade earlier an 1888 article in *The (Monroe, La.) Ouachita Telegraph* (which first appeared in the *New Orleans Picayune*) stated, “The word ‘Cajun’ is no more a term of reproach than the word ‘Hoosier’ applied to the natives of Indiana. It is associated with the idea of some rusticity and simplicity of manner and that is all. The writer has heard it playfully applied to a lovely Creole belle.” Added the article, “The Acadian himself is a Creole.” (As an aside, this corresponds to my own view of the Cajun-Creole relationship: as I state in a blog article, “Cajuns themselves are . . . a kind of Creole. . . .”)(5)



a visit to the home of the scholarly Charles Gayarre or the courtly Judge Bermudez or the cultured Claibornes, and then ask who are the Creoles, who is a Creole, he would get the response, a Louisianian of French or Spanish stock. The Acadians are of French peasant extraction, and a Creole, who perhaps could trace his lineage back to kings, as Charles Gayarre could, is not apt to consider him his equal. The word "Cajun" is no more a term of reproach than the word "Hoosier" applied to the natives of Indiana. It is associated with the idea of some rusticity and simplicity of manner and that is all. The writer has heard it playfully applied to a lovely Creole belle.

The two-thirds of the story, Carancero and Grande Pointe, are simple, pleasing, pastoral, almost idyllic. But why rant and froth about the superiority of these people over the New Orleans, Creoles? When, in

The Ouachita Telegraph (Monroe, La.), 28 April 1888.

Similarly, an 1887 Abbeville (S.C.) *Press and Banner* article (originally running in *The San Francisco Chronicle*) observed, “The Americans, and even the Creoles, have corrupted the name Acadian into ‘Cajun,’ which term . . . these people resent strongly, yet, as ‘Cajuns,’ they are known all over the state. They are, in fact, Creoles, being the descendants of French parents born in a French colony, but they are an entirely distinct people from all other populations of Gallic descent in Louisiana.”(6)

We can find *Cajun* used as an ethnic label still earlier in time — decades earlier, in fact. During the Civil War, for example, the term appeared in an 1862 issue of *The Cincinnati Commercial* (reprinted in *The Delaware [Ohio] Gazette*). Detained at Camp Pratt near New Iberia, a reporter for the Ohio paper took note of local Cajuns serving in the Confederate forces. “You don’t know what a Cajun is?” he inquired of his Midwest readers. “Of course you don’t, but I will try and tell you.”(7)

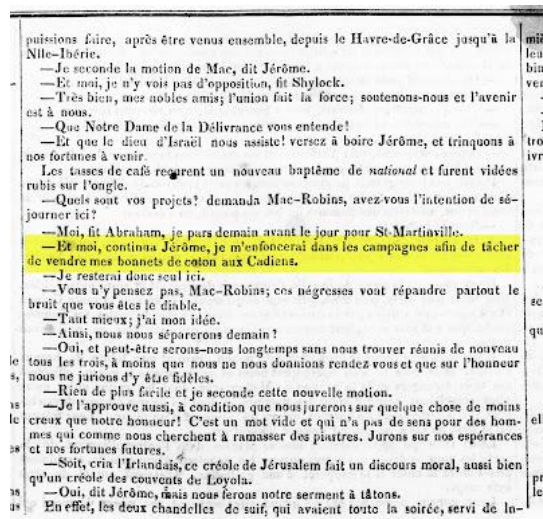
to me. example country ing sen- a Mont- drunk- has come south.— s, cafes good for f intoxi- so horri- and re- degrad- of plan- superior ity and consid- e I am kenness evance and de-	THE LOUISIANA CAJUNS. A correspondent of the Cincinnati Commercial, who was captured by the rebels in lower Louisiana and confined at Camp Pratt, thus describes a singular race of 'natives' who inhabit the swamps in the south-western part of that State : “Camp Pratt was filled with Cajun conscripts. You don't know what a Cajun is? Of course you don't, but I will try and tell you. A Cajun is a half-savage creature, of mixed French and Indian blood. They live in the swamps, and subsist by fishing and hunting and cultivating a small patch of corn and sweet potatoes. They are sallow, dried-up and mummy like in appearance, and stolid and stupid in expression. The wants of the Cajun are few, and his habits simple. With a bit of corn-bread, a potatoe, and a clove of garlic, with an occasional indulgence in stewed crawfish, he gets along quite comfortably, and for	dug, ther going de by their enc-sever will seem soil is ha do not si closer to In many it will be one foot enth of t procured a farm di deep with the botto to within ter are m ing are c Our m with cha
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The Delaware (Ohio) Gazette, 12 December 1862.

As for the word *Cadien*, which is merely the Louisiana French form of *Cajun*, it has been found in print as early as 1851. That year the Louisiana francophone newspaper *Le Pionnier de l'Assomption* of Napoleonville ran a piece of local-color fiction containing the line, “*Et moi, continua Jérôme, je m'enfoncerai dans les campagnes afin de tâcher de vendre mes bonnets de coton aux Cadiens.*” [Translation: “And I, continued Jerome, will go deep into the countryside to try and sell my cotton caps to the *Cadiens*.”](8)

Granted, many of these historic references deride the Cajun people as backward and ignorant; some even call the word *Cajun* an insult. My point, however, stands: *Cajun ethnic identity and the word Cajun appeared long before the mid- to*

late twentieth century, whether describing a discrete ethnic group or, conversely, a type of Creole, more or less (or not at all) distinct from other Creoles. Indeed, the examples I provide above are merely a few such references. I provide additional examples below, all chosen from the nineteenth century, including some using the alternate spellings *Cajan*, *Cajen*, *Cadian*, *Cadien* and *cadjien*. This list is by no means comprehensive: other such references exist in the historical record and still others may await discovery.



Le Pionnier de l'Assomption (Napoleonville, La.),
7 September 1851.



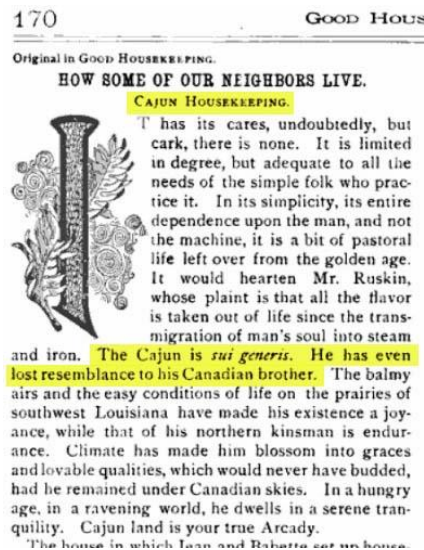
Addendum — Early Appearances of the Word Cajun and Its Variants

“As a people, the ‘Cajuns are very simple, for they live in communities so simple that straight conduct is a necessity. The men are fairly honest, but hot-blooded and often quarrelsome, the favorite weapon of the coast ‘Cajuns being the knife. . . . These ‘Cajuns are fine duck hunters, and know their country as no

stranger can. . . ." ~ E. Hough, "The Sunny South — VI," *Forest and Stream* (23 March 1895), 224-25.

"Presently we saw our first Acadians — nowhere spoken of in their own country otherwise than as 'Cajuns.'" ~ Julian Ralph, "Along the Bayou Teche," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (November 1893), 874.

"The Cajun is *sui generis* [one of a kind]. He has even lost resemblance to his Canadian brother. . . . Dancing and festivals are weekly affairs, for in Cajun land everybody knows everybody else, and entire communities are often bound by ties of kindred." ~ M. A. Byrne, "Cajun Housekeeping," *Good Housekeeping* (October 1891), 170.



Good Housekeeping (October 1891).

"In this delightful climate, where illness is almost unknown, people acquire the habit of living, and keep on ad infinitum, until, as [states] the proverb of the Cajuns (the descendants of the exiled Acadians), they get old, old, so old! then shrivel up and blow away." ~ T. W. Poole, *Some Late Words about Louisiana* (New Orleans: E. Marchand, 1889), 26.

"Will the *Reveille* [newspaper] point out of these appointments of Cadiens those who are not creoles." ~ The (St. Martinville, La.) *Weekly Messenger*, 29 October 1887, 1.

corney pro tem; Felix Olivier, P. D. Olivier, Tax Collectors; A. V. Fournet, Assessor; S. V. Martin, Surveyor; Alfred Fuselier, inspector of weights and measures.

Will the *Reveille* point out of these appointments of Cadiens those who are not creoles.

Dr. Dromgoole's English Female Bitters is not a beverage but a powerful uterine tonic and regulator, adapted to the

The (St. Martinville, La.)
Weekly Messenger, 29 October 1887.

"The Creoles proper will not share their distinction with the native descendants of those worthy Acadian exiles who . . . found refuge in Louisiana. These remain 'cadjians' or 'cajuns' [sic] . . ." ~ George E. Waring Jr. and George W. Cable, *History and Present Condition of New Orleans, Louisiana: Social Statistics of Cities, Tenth Census of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1881), 10.

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LOUISIANA.

Acadie." The French of the uneducated is a *patois* that would fall on the Parisian ear as almost the sound of a foreign dialect; these Acadians, or as in common colloquial parlance they are termed 'Cajuns', are generally illiterate, and as a race non-progressive and unenterprising. Though of America they refuse to become Americanized in habits and ideas—a primitive, pastoral people, who cling with peculiar pertinacity to the ways and religion of their forefathers, and are suspicious of educated Americans and of all innovations. They are kind and polite, and even the lowest class have a manner singularly suave and gentle. The men are fine specimens of manhood, of splendid physique and graceful in action; the females are pretty usually, with expressive faces and gentle, vivacious movements. They are a merry race, extremely fond of dancing and constantly indulging in social reunions among themselves. Their neighborhood balls are perpetual institutions, and the grace and beauty seen at one of them would astonish the fashionable belle or beau who wots not that these charms are found outside their own 'set' and particular circle.

The Roman Catholic religion is universal among the Creoles and

Louisiana Products, Resources and Attractions (1881).

"[T]hese Acadians, or as in common colloquial parlance they are termed 'Cajuns, are generally illiterate, and as a race non-progressive and unenterprising. Though of America they refuse to become Americanized. . . ." ~ Louisiana Bureau of Agriculture and Immigration, *Louisiana Products, Resources and Attractions* (New Orleans: *Times-Democrat*, 1881), 234.

"Among themselves they are 'Créole Français'; and Acadian — or rather its corruption 'Cajun,' as they pronounce it — is regarded as implying contempt." ~ "The Acadians of Louisiana," *Scribner's Monthly* XIX (January 1880), 383.

THE ACADIANS OF LOUISIANA.

ALTHOUGH the term "Acadian" is strictly appropriate only to the descendants of the Canadians and exiles from Acadie, who were among the early permanent settlers of Louisiana, it may frequently be heard applied to all the humbler classes of French origin throughout the state. Among themselves they are "Créole Français"; and Acadian—or rather its corruption "Cajun," as they pronounce it—is regarded as implying contempt. Indeed, the educated classes habitually designate those whom they regard as their social inferiors by the objectionable epithet. With the lower orders it is bandied from one to another in the same spirit; and none are so humble as not to feel the implied insult. If the situation is favorable, a fist fight is the result, the contest being spiced with such volleys of oaths as, were they translatable, would excite the envy of the most accomplished blasphemer of a western mining

sippi River, for ins owned large and 1 they have mostly y enterprising, energet cated class moving it were, finding their kind, while the mor are rapidly becomir their distinctive cha lish education, socia marriages with their But go back from tl navigable streams towns of importanc where steamboats r tensive prairies wh engine has not yet find genuine Aca changed, too, in chu ing from what th one hundred—year

Scribner's Monthly XIX (January 1880).

"'The Acadians of Louisiana,' — more familiarly called Cajuns — [are] a simple people, having much in common with their congeners described in Longfellow's poem." ~ *Scribner's* preview, *The Ellsworth* (Maine) *American*, 25 December 1879, 3.

"[W]e found [the campground] had been taken possession of by 'Cadiens,' whose little skiffs were moored to the shore." ~ "The

Dredge," *The Petite Anse Amateur* (Avery Island, La.), April 1879, pp. 25-26.

"Il est impossible de relire les pages émues de l'exode des Acadiens, ou plutôt des Cadiens, car tel est le nom véritable de cette vaillante population. . . ." [Translation: "It's impossible to read over the emotional pages about the exodus of the Acadians, or rather the Cadiens, for such is the true name of this valiant population. . . ." ~ "Bibliographie," *The Opelousas Courier*, 17 November 1877, 1.

leur attribue; ces appellations, aujourd'hui surannées n'empêchent pas que l'œuvre de colonisation n'était un cachet entièrement démocratique.

Il est impossible de relire les pages émues de l'exode des Acadiens, ou plutôt des Cadiens, car tel est le nom véritable de cette vaillante population, sans se sentir pénétré d'admiration pour ces pionniers de la civilisation, chez qui la rudesse des mœurs n'excluait pas la plus belle intelligence. On sait avec quelle autorité Longfellow s'est emparé de cet admirable sujet pour en faire un de ses chef-d'œuvre.

La société moderne apprécie à son exacte valeur les prétentions héraldiques et les revendications généalogiques. Les descendants des Thibodeau, des Landry, des Gandet, des Joffrion, des Martin peuvent s'enorgueillir de ce qui est aujourd'hui l'équivalent des let-

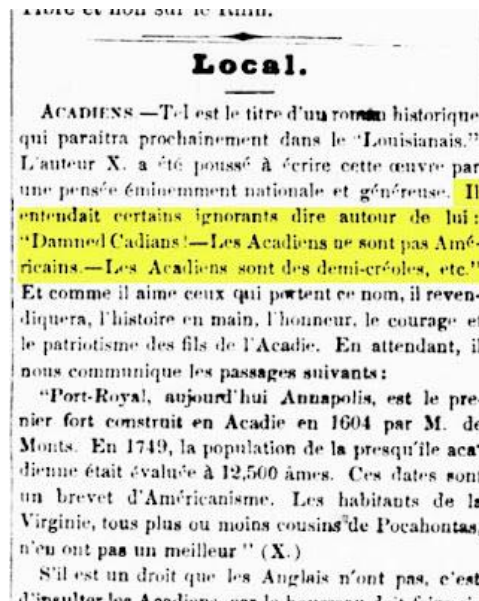
The Opelousas Courier, 17 November 1877.

"The Cajan [sic] was as prolific as his Canadian cousin." ~ "Our People: Where They Came from Originally, the Source of the Population of Louisiana," *The New Orleans Daily Democrat*, 4 March 1877, 2.

"The Acadians — abbreviated to 'Cajens' by our laconic race — form a small portion of the Creole population." ~ Albert Rhodes, "The Louisiana Creoles," *The Galaxy* 16 (August 1873), 254; cited in Carl A. Brasseaux, *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803-1877* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 102.

"[Q]uite a lot of them ["French *habitants*" from Canada] came to Louisiana. Here they took the name of 'Cadiens,' a contraction of Canadians or of Arcadians [*sic*]. . . . [T]he Cadiens are scarcely the people to comprehend, or indeed to execute, the laws of a republic. . . . [They are] a sort of semi-Creole race. . . ." ~ "The Posse of Red River," *New Orleans Republican*, 27 May 1873, 2.

"Il entendait certains ignorants dire autour de lui: 'Damned Cadians! — Les Acadiens ne sont pas Américains — Les Acadiens sont des demi-créoles, etc.'" [Translation: "He heard some ignorant people say around him: 'Damned Cadiens! — The Acadians aren't Americans — The Acadians are half-Creoles, etc.'"] ~ "Acadiens," *Le Louisianais* (St. James Parish, La.), 2 November 1867, 1.



Le Louisianais, 2 November 1867.

Notes

(1) See my book Shane K. Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 86-88, 93-94, 101-09, 136-37, 147. For more on the history of the word *Cajun*, including its variants, see Jacques Henry, "From *Acadien* to *Cajun* to *Cadien*: Ethnic Labelization and Construction of Identity," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 17 (Summer, 1998): 29-62. Henry's article remains important to understanding the development of Cajun ethnic labels, though it should be noted the article is somewhat out-of-date: working without today's Internet search capacities, Henry traced the word *Cajun* only as early as 1879 and found primarily negative references — though references are now known to extend back as early as 1862 and to include not only negative, but neutral and positive occurrences.

I choose neither to identify nor quote the sources to which I take exception and that prompted me to write this essay. Although that practice would be requisite for an academic publication, and would in some ways strengthen my assertions, I nevertheless do not wish this discussion to involve personalities, but, rather, only issues of substance and actual historical evidence.

(2) "Cajun Chefs Help Prepare U.S. Army Mess in London," *The Troy (N.Y.) Record*, 21 July 1943, 4.

(3) Images of the *Cajun Queen* and *Cajun Coonass* can be found in my blog article: Shane K. Bernard, "My Oddball Collection of Cajun Warplane Photos," *Bayou Teche Dispatches*, 31 May 2012. The original *Cajun Coonass* photograph is in the National Archives and Records Administration and is photograph #342-FH-3A-32507-79171a.c. It is dated "April, 1943" on verso; and "rec'd 7 Jan. 1944" on recto.

(4) "The 'Cajuns' of Louisiana," *Dallas (Tex.) News*, reprinted in *The Indianapolis Journal*, 28 January 1898, 7.

(5) "A Boston Criticism of Cable," *New Orleans Picayune*, reprinted in *The Ouachita Telegraph* (Monroe, La.), 28 April 1888, 1.

(6) "The Acadians: A Picturesque People Unchanged by Time," *San Francisco Chronicle*, reprinted in *The Abbeville (S.C.) Press and Banner*, 29 June 1887, 7.

(7) "The Louisiana Cajuns," *Cincinnati Commercial*, reprinted in *The Delaware (Ohio) Gazette*, 12 December 1862, 1.

(8) "La Negresse du Diable," *Le Pionnier de l'Assomption* (Napoleonville, La.), 7 September 1851, 1.





"Cajun sugarcane farmer with daughter,
near New Iberia, Louisiana,"
Russell Lee, photographer (1938)
(Source: Library of Congress)

THOUGHTS ON CAJUNS AND "WHITENESS"

I thank Dr. Barry Jean Ancelet, Dr. David Cheramie, Dr. Phebe Hayes, independent researcher Don Arceneaux, and former CODOFIL president Warren A. Perrin for proofing the below essay. Thanks also to Dr. John Mack Faragher for proofing endnote six.



In a recent essay I noted the understandable trend among some scholars and activists to reclaim what is Creole from the overweening, often misapplied blanket term *Cajun*. In another recent essay I examined the much less explicable trend of asserting, despite evidence to the contrary, that the word *Cajun* — and indeed the entire Cajun ethnic group — appeared only in the late 20th century.

Another questionable claim, found recently in both academic and more journalistic or bloggish sources, concerns the “whiteness”(1) of the Cajun people. In short, some writers claim that *Cajuns were not considered “white” until the 20th century and even, according to some, until the late 20th century.*(2)

Historical evidence, however, does not bear out this statement, which is often presented axiomatically, with little or no primary-source documentation, as if a self-evident truth.

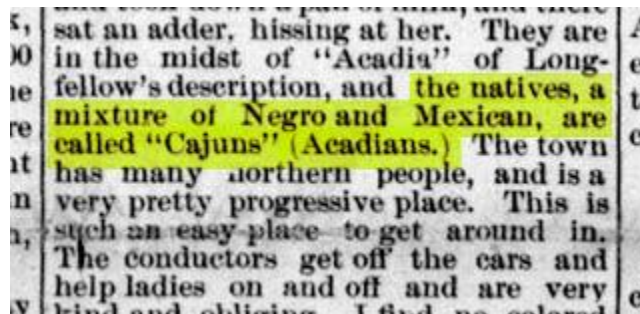
BAKER, J. Plaintiff has appealed from a judgment rejecting his demand for \$5,000 damages for an alleged slander. He is of the Caucasian race, of Acadian descent, and charges that defendant called him “a damned dirty low-down ‘Cadian’—pronouncing it ‘Cajan’—and a damned half-breed n****r.” Plaintiff and defendant had an altercation over a bill of \$4.50 that plaintiff owed defendant, in the course of which they used uncomplimentary language. Plaintiff had sent a negro to pay defendant 50 cents on account, and the latter had declined to accept such a small amount. On the occasion of the quarrel, he demanded payment of the \$4.50, and threatened to sue plaintiff. The latter referred to his previous offer to pay 50 cents on account, and defendant again condemned the offering of so small an amount. Battle.

Pitre v. Sacker,
in *The Southern Reporter* (1922)

Granted, the historical record does contain at least a few references suggesting a certain non-white quality to the Cajun people. In 1860, for example, a widely printed newspaper article noted of the Cajuns (called “Acadians” in the piece), “[They] are a strange clannish people, resembling much in appearance and habits, the race of Gipsies [*sic*].” Then, in 1922, a Cajun surnamed Pitre sued a man for slander who supposedly called him “a damned dirty low-down ‘Cadian’ — pronouncing it ‘Cajan’ — and a damned half-breed n****r.” This, however, is not so strong an example as

it may at first seem, because the defendant convinced a judge that he had not hurled the racial epithet at the Cajun plaintiff — who described himself in court as “of the Caucasian race, of Acadian descent” — but rather at a black messenger sent on behalf of the Cajun plaintive.(3)

Another questionable example dates from 1945, when a book reviewer described a novel’s fictional characters as “a poverty-stricken population of poor whites and cajuns [*sic*]” — arguably suggesting Cajuns were something other than “poor whites.” (*Perhaps poor non-whites?*) There is also the occasional reference to Cajuns as non-whites that can be traced to a simple lack of cultural understanding. For instance, in 1897 an Iowan visiting south Louisiana noted, “[T]he natives, a mixture of Negro and Mexican, are called ‘Cajuns’ (Acadians).” (Even so, this is not so egregious an error as one by a mid-20th-century author who traced the Cajuns’ ethnicity to Christian disciples in first-century Armenia!)(4)



Decorah (Iowa)
Public Opinion (1897)

Found more frequently, however, are references to Cajuns as separated from the mass of white people not by race, but by class. In 1866, for instance, a writer for *Harper's* described Cajuns as “the descendants of Canadian French settlers in Louisiana; and by dint of intermarriage [with each other] they have succeeded in getting pretty well down in the social scale. Without energy, education, or ambition, they are good representatives of the white trash.” This

negative classist view persisted into the modern era, when, for example, United Artists re-released a 1956 motion picture set among hostile Cajuns under the new title *Poor White Trash*. Again, this trend reflects a perceived class distinction, not a racial one, between Cajuns and other whites.(5)

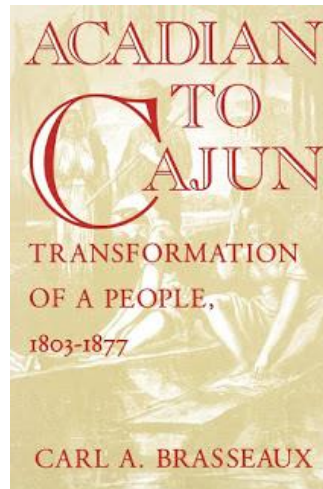


Ad for the Cajun-themed movie *Poor White Trash*, originally released under the title *Bayou* (1956 & 1961).

Turning from *class* back to the original issue of *race*: despite rare and iffy exceptions, the general trend is that others have overwhelmingly viewed Cajuns as “white.” In fact, the historical record indicates that Cajuns have been considered “white” since well into the 19th-century, when their Acadian ancestors and other ethnic groups coalesced in south Louisiana to become the Cajuns.(6)

I find this unsurprising because the Cajuns’ ancestors hailed primarily from Europe (mainly France, but also Germany, Spain, and elsewhere on the continent) and because Cajuns — according to commonly held standards persisting over time — “looked white” and, for all practical purposes, *were* “white.” (At this point it is worth noting that race is increasingly viewed as an outmoded concept, one unsupported by biology or other scientific fields. This is, however, problematic for historians because, even if the idea of

race is bankrupt, the concept nevertheless remains an extremely strong catalyst in historical events.)(7)



Brasseaux's
Acadian to Cajun (1992)

I base my assertions about Cajun “whiteness” on evidence like that found in the below list of historical references. This list makes no pretense of completeness: there are no doubt many more historical references to Cajuns as “white” remaining to be found.

Some of the below sources express negative views of Cajuns as well as overtly racist sentiments about African Americans. This unpleasant fact, however, has no bearing on the issue at hand: those benighted sources, like the more innocuous ones, nonetheless viewed Cajuns as “white.” Indeed, I find it interesting that the racist sources, instead of rejecting the perhaps suspect Roman Catholic, French-speaking Cajuns as something other than “white,” actually embraced them *as “white.”* (Likewise, I believe it speaks volumes that, as historian Carl A. Brasseaux has noted of the racist White League chapters formed in postbellum south Louisiana, “Acadians [Cajuns] constituted a disproportionately large percentage of their memberships.” This prompts the question, “If Cajuns were not viewed as ‘white’ until

recently, why, then, did so many belong to this 19th-century white supremacist group?")(8)

Here is the list of supporting evidence for Cajun "whiteness":



"They proposed to hang the whole settlement because a colored man living there once killed a white Acadian [Cajun]." ~ "The Vigilantes of Vermilion," *New Orleans Republican*, reprinted in *The Opelousas Journal*, 21 November 1873, 2.

"[W]hen the engine puffed up to the station a crowd of six or seven hundred people, white and black, old and young, African and 'Cadien [Louisiana French for 'Cajun'], thronged around the landing place. . . ." ~ "A Grant Hoax," *New Orleans Democrat*, reprinted in the (Baton Rouge) *Louisiana Capitolian*, 3 April 1880, 2.

issippi at La Fouché and Teche, and on the prairies of Attakapas and Opelousas."
"How many of these people are there?"
"There is no way of telling exactly how many there are, as the canvass of Louisiana merely shows a distinction between the colored and white population. **The Acadians are all white**, and it is probable that there are not less than 50,000 of them."
"Have they many very peculiar habits?"
"They have none but peculiar habits. They are antiquated to the last degree. The French language

Clarksville (Tenn.)
Weekly Chronicle (1884)

"The Acadians are all white . . . [and] are still a strong reminder of the old Norman stock of which they come. . . ." ~ "The Acadians,"

New York Telegram, reprinted in *Clarksville (Tenn.) Weekly Chronicle*, 3 May 1884, 4.

106 THE HOUSE OF BONDAGE.

few miles from the old place where I was raised and sold from when mother and I was separated. My new master was a mighty mean man, and would not allow any of his slaves to go anywhere. He notified all the 'poor 'Cadien patrollers' to whip his slaves whenever they caught any of them off the place."

"Who were these 'Cadien patrollers, Uncle Stephen?"

"Why, child, they were the meanest things in creation; they were poor, low down white folks, that descended from a French and Spanish mixture. They had no slaves themselves, and so they just took pleasure in patrolling the

Albert, *The House of Bondage* (1890).

"Who were these 'Cadien patrollers, Uncle Stephen?' 'Why, child, they were the meanest things in creation; they were poor, low down white folks. . .'" ~ Octavia Victoria Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage; Or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves* [fictional work] (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1890), 106.

"Nearly all the white folks who trudged along the highway were Acadians. . . and it is strange indeed to hear that we must not call them 'Cajuns to their faces. . .'" ~ Julian Ralph, "Acadians at Home," *Harper's Magazine*, reprinted in *The Indianapolis Journal*, 3 November 1893, 2.

ALONG

and with a rude brick chimney outside and a gaping fireplace within. Nearly all the white folks who trudged along the highway were Acadians, all but hallowed by the magic of Longfellow, and it was strange indeed to hear that we must not call them 'Cajuns to their faces lest they be offended, that the term is taken as one of

Ralph, "Acadians at Home,"
Harper's (1893)

"It is a race war rather than a political fight that is now waging in St. Landry Parish in Louisiana. It is between the Acadians . . . and the negro [*sic*]. . . . [N]ine-tenths of the white people are Acadians, descendants of the unfortunate French settlers of Nova Scotia. They have no use for the negro, and the national [natural?] antipathy between the two races is very strong." ~ No title, *Waterbury* (Conn.) *Evening Democrat*, 17 April 1896, 2.

gro. St Landry is the head center of the Acadians and is the largest parish of Louisiana, with a population of 60,000, and nine-tenths of the white people are Acadians, descendants of the unfortunate French settlers of . . . ova Scotia. They have no use for the negro, and the national antipathy between the two races is very strong. This is why St Landry is now an

Waterbury (Conn.)
Evening Democrat (1896)

"[A]mong these white men, and forming a large portion of them, are the descendants of the Acadians who were transported from Nova Scotia to Louisiana. . . ." ~ *The Sunday at Home* 45 (1897), 408.

"But many of the best white families in Louisiana, especially the descendants of the old Acadians, keep their ancient simplicity and are unable to read." ~ "The Negro's Ballot," *The (Phoenix) Arizona Republican*, 22 January 1898, 2.

"The third class of white colonists were the Acadians, or, as they are popularly called in Louisiana today, 'Cagans.'" ~ "Whites in the Majority," *The (Washington, D.C.) Times*, 12 August 1901, 3. [Note: by "third class" the author does not mean "inferior"; he means Cajuns by chance are the third group of white Louisianians discussed in his article.]

"[T]he Acadians in Louisiana are about the most prolific white people on the globe." ~ No title, *The Colfax (Wash.) Gazette*, 13 September 1901, 4.

foul- and aths de- lax- our mily ame, chist sert, and too and	if we include its large emigrant element, almost 3,000,000 and Germany something over that figure. The slow increase is the more curious when it is observed that the French in Canada and the Acadians in Louisiana are about the most prolific white people on the globe. It may not be assumed, however, as confidently as it once was, that this condition in the mother country is an indication of "decadence." Rather it is a consequence of the French property laws and of a love for the land of	HOT ial we th Co PH for or pr 49
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Colfax (Wash.) Gazette (1901)

"[Y]our Cajan will give a lazy ha ha, where any other white man would swear. . . ." ~ E. H. Lancaster, "The Wooing of Angela" [fictional work], *The Coalville (Utah) Times*, 5 December 1902, 3.

"[T]he negroes [*sic*] are being crowded out of work on the sugar plantations by white labor, such as Acadians. . . ." ~ "Negro's Critical Position in the Industrial World," *The (Raleigh, N.C.) News & Observer*, 7 December 1902, Section One, 11.

"Then there are the 'Cajuns,' white people, the descendants of the Acadians. . . ." ~ "Louisiana Sugar: Statement of Joe B. Chaffe, Representing the American Cane Growers' Association," *Senate Documents, 67th Congress, 2nd Session, 1921-1922, Vol. 5, Part 3* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1922), 2308.

they not?

Mr. CHAFFE. We have a great many Creoles—that means white people descended from European parents. The greater number are descended from French and Spanish. Then there are the "Cajuns," white people, the descendants of the Acadians who were driven out of Nova Scotia because of their religious convictions and came to Louisiana. I know of no more honorable representative of that portion of our people than Senator Broussard, of Louisiana.

Senator McCUMBER. We will readily agree to that.

Mr. CHAFFE. And he is quite as proud of the name as anyone is of his particular nationality.

Senate Documents (1922)

"The whites, transported by separate barges, were Acadian farming families, chattering among themselves in a thick, unfamiliar French dialect." ~ Will Irwin, "Except for War, America Knows No Destruction Equal to That of Flood, Writes Noted Author," *New Britain (Conn.) Herald*, 17 May 1927, Sec. 2, 21.

"A majority of the white tenants are 'Cajuns.' These Cajuns are trustworthy, but as a rule are illiterate." ~ Sherrod De Floy Morehead, *Merchant Credit to Farmers in Louisiana* (Russellville, [Ark.?]: privately printed, 1929), 16.

"One of the films in the making is a story of the Cajuns, a little known group of primitive whites." ~ "Out Where the Movies Begin," (Washington, D.C.) *Evening Star*, 24 May 1933, B-12.



(Washington, D.C.) *Evening Star* (1933)

"[The Creoles] often had a word for the poorer Cajuns: 'Canaille!' — that was their way of saying poor-white trash." ~ Shields McIlwaine, *The Southern Poor-White from Lubberland to Tobacco Road* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), 143.

"McIlwaine considers the Louisiana Cajun also as poor-white. . . ." ~ *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1940), 229.

"[T]here is [in Louisiana] an aristocracy of French descent and a poverty-stricken population of poor whites and cajuns [sic]. . . ." ~ "A Lion in the Streets" [book review], (Washington, D.C.) *Evening Star*, 10 June 1945, C-3.

"[T]he Cajuns, the Louisiana poor white descendants of Longfellow's Acadians. . . ." ~ *The Journal of Negro History* 34 (1949), 123.

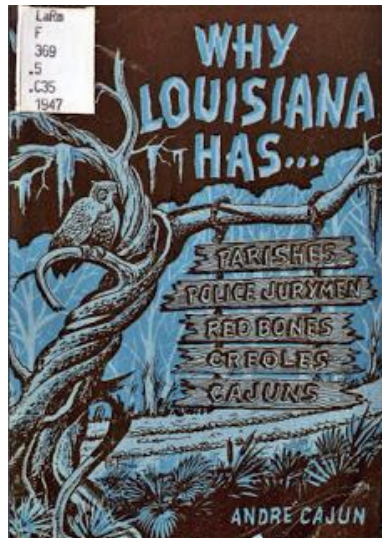
Notes

(1) In this essay I use the term “whiteness” to mean “a set of characteristics and experiences generally associated with being a member of the white race and having white skin.” Although I am primarily interested in this basic definition, the term “whiteness” can also refer, for example, to “the way that white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups are compared” and “a historically contingent and socially constructed racial category, once defined . . . by privilege and power. . . .” among other, similar definitions. Nicki Lisa Cole, “The Definition of Whiteness in American Society,” ThoughtCo.com, 8 November 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/whiteness-definition-3026743>, accessed 22 November 2020; “Whiteness,” National Museum of African American History and Culture/Smithsonian Institution, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/whiteness>, accessed 22 November 2020; Teresa J. Guess, “The Social Construction of Whiteness: Racism by Intent, Racism by Consequence,” *Critical Sociology* 32 (July 2006), 667, per <https://www.cwu.edu/diversity/sites/cts.cwu.edu.diversity/files/documents/constructingwhiteness.pdf>, accessed 22 November 2020.

I choose neither to identify nor quote the sources to which I take exception and that prompted me to write this essay. Although that practice would in some ways strengthen my assertions, I nevertheless do not wish this discussion to involve personalities, but, rather, only issues of substance and actual historical evidence.

(2) The word *Cajun* is used in this essay to refer solely to the so-named people of south Louisiana and a small portion of east Texas, not to the identically named persons of different heritage who inhabit part of Alabama and who have been described in modern scholarship as “not entirely White, Black, or Indian but [who] constitute a triracial community somewhat reproductively isolated and inbred.” See W. S. Pollitzer et al., “The Cajuns of Southern Alabama: Morphology and Serology,” *American Journal of Physical*

Anthropology 47 (July 1977): 1-6; the quote is from the abstract of this article found on the website of the National Library of Medicine, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/888930/>, accessed 19 November 2020.



André Cajun,
Why Louisiana Has. . . (1947)

(3) “Acadians in Louisiana,” *The* [Baltimore, Md.] *Daily Exchange*, 19 October 1860, 1; *Pitre v. Sacker*, 23 June 1922, Louisiana Supreme Court, No. 23387 (151 La. 1079, 92 So. 705 [1922]), cited in *Louisiana Reports*, Vol. 151 (St. Paul: West Publishing, 1922), 1079.

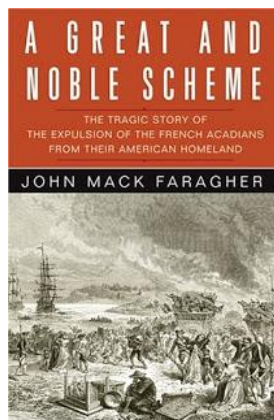
(4) “A Lion in the Streets” [book review], (Washington, D.C.) *Evening Star*, 10 June 1945, C-3; Mrs. Geo. P. Bent, “From Sunny Climes,” *Decorah* (Iowa) *Public Opinion*, 16 March 1897, 1; André Cajun [pseudonym], *Why Louisiana Has. . .* (New Orleans: Harmanson, 1947), 16-21. This volume reads, “The story of the class, or group of people in Louisiana known as ‘Cajuns’[,] began the hour St. Bartholomew, a disciple [of Jesus], gave up the ghost. The location of this sad event was the ancient land of Armenia. . . .” The author goes on to state that over roughly 1,700 years a group

of persecuted Christians migrated from Armenia to France, Nova Scotia, and, finally, Louisiana, where they became the Cajuns.

(5) Shane K. Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), xvii, 121. In this 2003 book I note that Cajuns were known to be reviled by local blacks as “Acadian n*****s,” which would appear to be a prime example of labeling Cajuns as non-whites. On closer examination, however, I see that the original 19th-century quote states, “the n*****, when they want to express contempt for one of their own race, call him [a fellow black person] an Acadian n*****.” In other words, this pejorative was used as a black-on-black insult, not as an expression of Cajun non-whiteness. See A. R. W. [Alfred Rudolph Waud], “Acadians of Louisiana,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 20 October 1866, 670.

(6) One researcher has questioned the “whiteness” of the original Acadian exiles arriving in Louisiana, noting esteemed Yale historian John Mack Faragher’s examination, in his 2006 book *A Great and Noble Scheme*, of “*métissage*” — the intermarriage of French settlers in *Acadie* with the indigenous Míkmaq. While it is true that Acadians and Míkmaq often produced *métis* offspring, it is important to avoid exaggerating the extent of this interracial mixing. *Métissage* played a more important role in Acadia’s early history, when French male colonists turned to Native American women for companionship because of a lack of female colonists. This trend, however, became less common with the arrival of additional French women and entire French families, as well as with the coming of French priests who discouraged interracial dalliances. As Faragher himself notes, “*métissage* declined as colonists spent more time farming and less time trading [with Native Americans]. It was replaced by the recruitment of wayfaring Europeans.” Faragher also states that while in some ways the Acadians and Míkmaq were “brothers,” it was nonetheless the case that “Acadians and Míkmaq maintained separate identities and separate communities. . . .” By the 1730s, Faragher observes, “Acadians and Míkmaq were no longer as close as they once had been. *Métissage* was increasingly rare, and the [Roman

Catholic] missionary Pierre Maillard pursued a course that kept natives separate from [colonial] inhabitants.” In short, while Acadians and Míkmaq were interrelated, Faragher does not go so far as to assert that the Acadians had ceased to be primarily of European extract or, for that matter, ceased to be considered by others as “white.” As a French-language Louisiana newspaper, *Le Louisianais*, therefore stated in 1873, “*Rappelons nous donc les Acadiens. Ils étaient blancs, pauvres, honnêtes et robustes. . .*” — “Let us thus remember the Acadians. They were *white*, poor, honest and robust” [emphasis added]. See John Mack Faragher, *A Great and Noble Scheme: The Tragic Story of the Expulsion of the French Acadians from Their American Homeland* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 63, 160, 203; “Local,” *Le Louisianais* (Covent, La.), 15 February 1873, 1.



Faragher's *A Great and Noble Scheme* (2006)

(7) See for example Elizabeth Kolbert, “There’s No Scientific Basis for Race — It’s a Made-Up Label,” *National Geographic*, 12 March 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/race-genetics-science-africa/#clos>, accessed 19 November 2020; Megan Gannon, “Race Is a Social Construct, Scientists Argue,” *Scientific American*, 5 February 2016, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/race-is-a-social-construct-scientists-argue/>, accessed 19 November 2020; Melissa

Rice, "Evolution and Race: Biologically, Race is No Longer an Issue, Scientific Panel Agrees," *Cornell Chronicle*, 11 February 2009, <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2009/02/experts-biologically-race-no-longer-issue>, accessed 19 November 2020; "Executive Summary: AAPA Statement on Race and Racism," American Association of Physical Anthropologists, ca. 27 March 2019, <https://physanth.org/about/position-statements/aapa-statement-race-and-racism-2019/>, accessed 19 November 2020.

(8) Carl A. Brasseaux, *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803-1877* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 144.





"Family of Cajun farmer living near New Iberia,"
by Russel Lee, 1938
(Source: Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

**BORN OF "ELITE" WHITE REACTIONISM?:
ASSESSING CLAIMS ABOUT THE RISE OF CAJUN ETHNICITY**

I thank Dr. Barry Jean Ancelet, Dr. Carl A. Brasseaux, Dr. David Cheramie, independent researcher Don Arceneaux, and former CODOFIL president Warren A. Perrin for proofing the below essay and offering their insights.

*To clarify the thrust of the below essay: I do not seek to counter general assertions that the Louisiana state agency CODOFIL, either purposely or by neglect, excluded Creoles of African descent from its cultural, economic, and touristic mission. Rather, I seek to counter the very specific assertion that CODOFIL conspired to exclude Creoles of African descent **by creating in or after 1968 a new, White ethnic identity called "Cajun."***

A handful of scholars and activists have claimed or strongly implied that Cajuns are something less than a bona fide ethnic group. Confusing the rise of Cajun ethnicity (which occurred in the 1800s) with the rise of the Cajun pride movement (which occurred in the 1960s), they allege the group coalesced only a few decades ago — in the '60s or later. As one source asserts, "Cajun identity emerged in post-Vietnam Louisiana," adding elsewhere "Cajun is a new identity. . . an identity from the 1960s onward." A sociolinguist who embraces this assessment contends it reveals "the ideological roots of the Cajun movement among white reactionary responses to civil rights."⁽¹⁾

In other words, not only are Cajuns a recent ethnic group, little more than five decades old, but they originated as an expression of overt White supremacy.

An early source for this claim is a French Canadian geographer who in 1991 stated, referring to the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), a state-funded French education group launched in 1968:

Despite the fact that the Creole identity had always carried a positive image for white and black francophones of Southern Louisiana, it is under the Cajun label that CODOFIL proceeded to unify the region. This choice can only be interpreted as the desire for the French Louisiana elite to assure for the region a "white" identity. . . .⁽²⁾



CODOFIL logo.

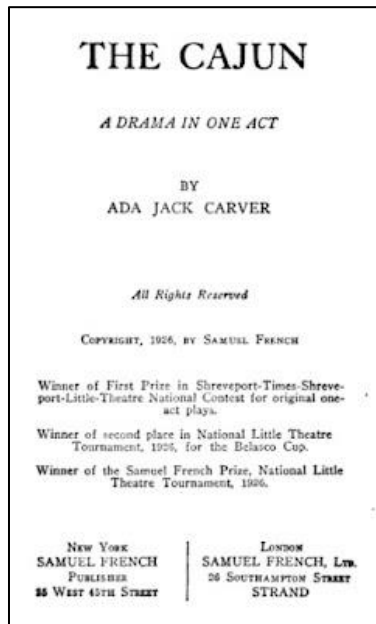
The implication that Cajuns are less than a bona fide ethnic group hinges on the claim (to cite the aforementioned sociolinguist) that “the Cajun movement” sought through CODOFIL to recast “Louisiana’s white population as a marginalized group under the ‘Cajun’ label.”

But is this true?

Did a White “French Louisiana elite” conspire in the late 1960s to construct a new ethnic identity called “Cajun” for the purpose of excluding Creoles of African heritage?

The argument is, to say the least, dubious, partly because there is no real *primary-source* evidence to support it. (If there is, what is it?) Moreover, by CODOFIL’s birth in 1968 Cajuns had long been recognized as a viable Louisiana ethnic group — either, depending on the source, an entirely separate Acadian-derived people or (as I believe) a partly Acadian-derived subset of the larger Creole population. Thus, for example, *The Indianapolis Journal* observed in 1898, “[A] large element of the French population of the State [of Louisiana] are not creoles, but Acadians, or, as they call themselves and are generally called, ‘Cajuns.’” Conversely, the *San Francisco Chronicle* noted a little over a decade earlier (in 1887), “The Americans, and even the Creoles, have corrupted the name Acadian into ‘Cajun,’ . . . [and] as ‘Cajuns,’ they are known all over the state. They are, in fact, Creoles.” Clearly, one of these late 19th-century sources viewed the Cajuns as Creoles, one did not; both, however, regarded the population as a living ethnic group “generally called” and “known all over the state” as Cajuns. Thus, we have lawmaker L. O. Broussard’s assertion, made during a Louisiana state legislative session in 1921, that “he was proud that he was a Cajin [*sic*]. . . .”(4)

These examples and many others from the late 19th century onward prove that Cajun ethnicity did not suddenly materialize from nothingness after CODOFIL’s birth in 1968.(5)



Title page,
Carver's 1926 drama.

In fact, anthropologist Jacques Henry and I, among others, have found primary-source references to the ethnic group as early as 1851 using the French term *Cadien* and as early as 1862 using the English form *Cajun* (not to mention other mid- to late-19th-century spellings like *Cadjin*).⁽⁶⁾

After the Civil War the term appears with growing frequency in a variety of source material — the late 19th- and early 20th-century fiction of George Washington Cable and Kate Chopin; the title of Ada Jack Carver's 1926 prize-winning drama; the subject of a 1942 Columbia Pictures short documentary; the nose art of World War II U.S. aircraft; and the name of a mid-1950s sounding rocket used by NASA's precursor, to name only a few. (For more about historical "Cajun" references, see my second article in this volume.)

Then there is the claim that the French revival movement advanced by CODOFIL was pro-Cajun. CODOFIL's founding can certainly be viewed as an expression of Cajun pride and

empowerment. Many of its original legislative supporters, for example, identified as Cajuns, as did many of its inaugural members. Moreover, CODOFIL often responded to perceived affronts to the Cajun people.

In reality, however, the organization at once took on a much broader mission: promoting continental French in Louisiana — the French of the *Académie Française*. Indeed, the bill creating CODOFIL made no mention of Acadians, Cajuns, or Cajun French — nor, tellingly, do the minutes of CODOFIL's first executive meeting, held in October 1968. Those minutes refer only to the goal of advancing "French" and "Louisiana French."⁽⁷⁾

The following motion made by Mr. Moses Phillips, was duly seconded and unanimously approved.

To appoint the Superintendents of the various School Boards in the State as Advisors to the Council.

The following explanation of Act 257 was given:

"The Legislature required the State Board of Education and the state colleges who give a major in French, to train teachers for the elementary schools. This program is now in effect under the leadership of Drs. Chandler and Phillips."

Dr. Richard Chandler, USL, made the following report:

"Several years ago we realized that Louisiana French could be turned into something of practical educational value and that one of the great needs of such a program, as it is now being provided for by Legislation, would be to provide trained French teachers in the classrooms. There was not, until last week, a single curriculum in any Louisiana university or college for French teachers in the elementary schools.

Five Louisiana teachers participated in a teacher training program conducted at USL during the summer of 1968 under a NDEA grant. They realized that what they had in their hands as a natural resource was a very practical educational tool which could be put to use almost immediately with the proper kind of professional training."

Act 409 was explained as follows by the Chairman:

"This is the Act that created the Council for the Development of Louisiana French. It was a Council composed of fifty (50) members to be recommended by the Legislators of the State of Louisiana and appointed by the Governor. The purpose of which and the powers given to it were to do all things necessary to accomplish the development, utilization and preservation of the French language as found in the State of Louisiana for the cultural, economic and tourist benefit of the State.

This Council, I think, is going to be the propaganda arm for the basic educational Acts; it is going to implement all the the activities. Our work is a great physiological

Excerpt, minutes of 1st CODOFIL meeting, October 1968.
(Note its original name: Council for the Development of Louisiana French.)
(Source: UL Lafayette Archives)

Furthermore, claims that CODOFIL sought to exclusively preserve or promote Cajun culture are undercut by its long-serving president's open scorn for Cajun French. That president, James R. "Jimmie" Domengeaux, publicly revealed his disdain for the dialect when, for instance, he aggressively suppressed *Cajun French I*, a textbook prepared by local Cajun educator James Donald Faulk.

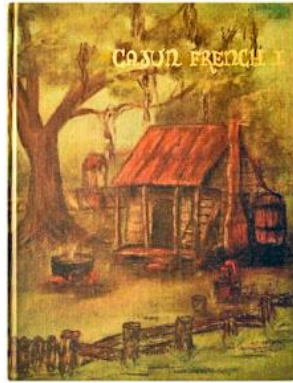


Jimmie Domengeaux,
shown the year of CODOFIL's birth.
(Source: *La Louisiane*, September 1968
[film, 15 mins. 2 secs.],
ORTF, France)

Domengeaux squelched the book even as many language educators in the state considered *Cajun French I* well-intentioned if flawed (in large part because it rendered Cajun French in an English-based phonetic code while omitting conventional French spelling).⁽⁸⁾ As I remarked in my dissertation and subsequent book *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (2003):

Domengeaux opposed [Faulk's textbook] simply because he despised Cajun French, and a bitter public feud erupted when CODOFIL's leader dismissed the textbook as "a bunch of chicken scratches." Faulk fired back, "All the Cajun people are for me. They hate his guts." Domengeaux ultimately succeeded in blocking the use of Faulk's textbook

in classrooms — but in doing so he caused a public relations disaster. The media depicted CODOFIL as an anti-Cajun Goliath, a charge that had been levied for years by some grassroots activists. Newspaper headlines reinforced this perception: “CODOFIL Chief Trying to Block Cajun French Book,” “CODOFIL Frowns on Cajun French Textbook,” “CODOFIL Versus Local Man.” . . .



Faulk's *Cajun French I* (1977).

I continued:

Domengeaux further damaged the French preservation movement when during the Faulk affair he told a United Press International journalist that Cajun French was “worse than redneck English.” An Associated Press reporter attributed a similar remark to Domengeaux a year later, when esteemed Columbia University folklorist Alan Lomax criticized CODOFIL’s use of imported French instructors. Moreover, Domengeaux defended his practice of hiring foreign instructors by asserting, “They can speak French better than any damn Louisianian.”(9)

Given this, it hardly seems likely Domengeaux conspired with other elites to elevate Cajuns and their dialect, either to exclude Creoles or for any other reason.



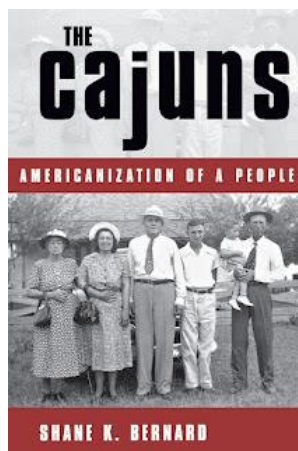
Domengeaux speaking to Creoles in French.
(Source: *La Louisiane*, September 1968
[film, 15 mins. 2 secs.],
ORTF, France)

Although unrelated to CODOFIL's activities, it is an unfortunate truth that for years the term "Cajun" has been applied to many things decidedly non-Cajun, including things actually "Creole" (a subject I address earlier in this volume). This practice understandably perturbs Creoles. It may surprise some, however, that this blanket use of the term also perturbs Cajuns — especially when those faux attributions are of a ridiculous "New Orleans-style Cajun pizza" variety, to quote folklorist and linguist Barry Jean Ancelet. As Cajun musician and grassroots activist Dewey Balfa once lamented, "Cajun is being so commercialized. Someday it's going to be too much, if it ain't already."⁽¹⁰⁾



Example of an odd "Cajun" product.

Rather than blame the slapdash use of “Cajun” on a cabal of White French-speaking elites and their acolytes, would it not make more sense to blame, say, *the media and hospitality industries*, the latter of which includes the *tourism and culinary fields*? These economic sectors certainly had the motive (revenue) and the influence (national and local radio, television, and print ads — not to mention restaurant menus) to stress “Cajun” at the expense of “Creole.” But perhaps those industries did not “choose” between “Cajun” and “Creole” at all, but merely used “Cajun,” trendy catchword as it became in the 1980s, out of ignorance? Or perhaps they seized on “Cajun” because they worried “Creole” — a nebulous term to some that can spark confusion and debate — would baffle uninitiated consumers?



I trace the "Cajun craze"
in my 2003 book.

I, however, believe a more likely culprit for the ubiquity of the “Cajun” label might be found in a pervasive force beyond anyone’s real control — namely, the currents of American pop culture. Since the “Cajun craze” of the 1980s (sparked, oddly enough, by a culinary phenomenon called *blackened red fish*), pop culture has demonstrated an amazing ability to conjure up the word “Cajun” in some truly bizarre ways. As I observed in my *Americanization* book:

Something peculiar happened to Cajun culture in the late twentieth century. Once derided as backward, it suddenly became associated with words like “hot,” “chic,” and “trendy.” Mainstream society not only discovered Cajun culture, it embraced it, usurped it, and reshaped it almost beyond recognition. . . . A soft drink company in north Louisiana hawked Cajun Cola. A condiment manufacturer in Arizona introduced Ass Kickin’ Cajun Hot Sauce. A mollusk farm in Oregon marketed “Cajun-Style” Kitchen-Sliced Slugs. . . . Country star Ricky Skaggs reached the *Billboard* Top Ten with “Cajun Moon,” British pop band Adam and the Ants sang about “Cajun Twisters,” and heavy metal rock group Exodus recorded a tune called “Cajun Hell.” . . . Cookbooks appeared with strange titles like *Microwave Cajun Country Cookbook*, *Cajun Vegetarian Cooking*, and *Kosher Cajun Cookbook*. . . . Marvel comics added a Cajun super hero, Gambit, to its pantheon of crime fighters like Spiderman, the Incredible Hulk, and Captain America. Meanwhile, hack writers issued cheap romance novels with titles like *Cajun Rose*, *Cajun Summer*, and *Cajun Caress*. Even the underworld of hardcore pornography exploited the Cajun frenzy. . . .(11)

Those espousing the “French Louisiana elite” theory do, it must be admitted, cite one piece of *circumstantial* evidence for dubbing “the Cajun movement” a “White reactionary” effort born of racism. That circumstantial evidence: CODOFIL’s president, the aforementioned James R. “Jimmie” Domengeaux, *made racist statements*.

Which is true.

Domengeaux, however, was one man; and one man alone does not make a movement.(12)

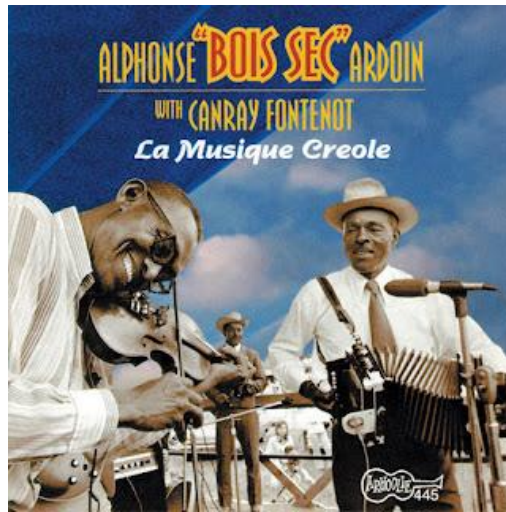
In fact, one of Domengeaux’s closest allies in CODOFIL’s French revival effort was Dr. Raymond S. Rodgers, a non-Cajun northerner, Columbia graduate, and University of Southwestern Louisiana political science professor. Embracing the 1960s counterculture,

Rodgers belonged to the local anti-racist Human Relations Council (which met in his Lafayette residence), openly criticized local conservatives, and identified his own political philosophy (to quote Rodgers himself) as “racial liberalism.”(13)



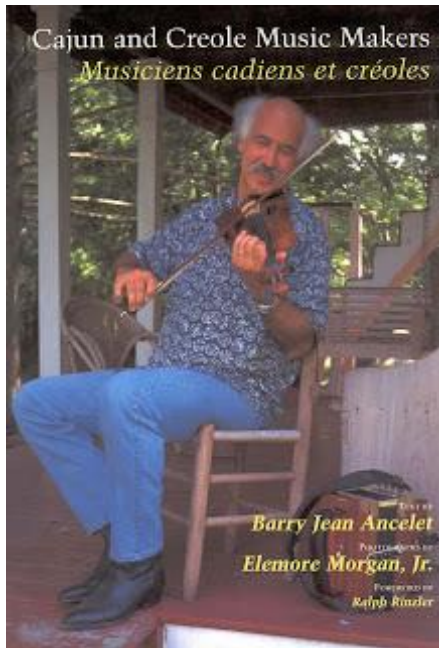
Raymond S. Rodgers, ca. 1973.
(Source: City of Vancouver Archives
[*Vancouver Sun*/Pacific Press])

Another inaugural CODOFIL member was Haitian-born Creole educator Dr. Roch Mirabeau, director of the non-English language program at historically Black Southern University. Then there were Mirabeau’s fellow progressive-minded CODOFIL members: USL language professor Dr. Hosea Phillips; USL political science professor Dr. Philip F. Dur; state foreign language specialist and high-school language educator Audrey Babineaux George; *Athénée Louisianais* literary society president James Bezou; USL college student and future language professor Ginette Baillargeon; Cajun and Creole music activists Paul Tate and Revon Reed, the latter of whom worked closely with renowned Creole musicians Bois-Sec Ardoin and Canray Fontenot.(14)



La Musique Creole, originally issued 1974,
with liner notes by CODOFIL member Revon Reed.

These hardly seem like “White reactionaries” bent on segregating Louisiana’s Black and multiracial Creoles from their White counterparts. This is not to say that *some* early CODOFIL members were not reactionaries. Domengeaux, Roy Theriot, and C. J. “Bobby” Dugas, for example, could certainly be illiberal.⁽¹⁵⁾ And no doubt some CODOFIL members viewed the organization as a negative counter to the civil rights movement — but one should avoid broad-brushing an entire organization (and movement) based on the attributes of only a few members. Many involved with CODOFIL, such as the aforesaid progressives, did not recoil from the civil rights movement. Some even embraced it. Ancelet, for example, recalls of young CODOFIL-linked scholars who like himself came of age in the late 1960s and early ‘70s: “[M]any of our generation of ‘activists’ insisted consistently on including Cajuns and Creoles in our considerations. We deliberately included all angles of the Louisiana French experience out of a desire to be thorough. We also worked actively against efforts to disparage or exclude any part of the mix from the whole story.”⁽¹⁶⁾

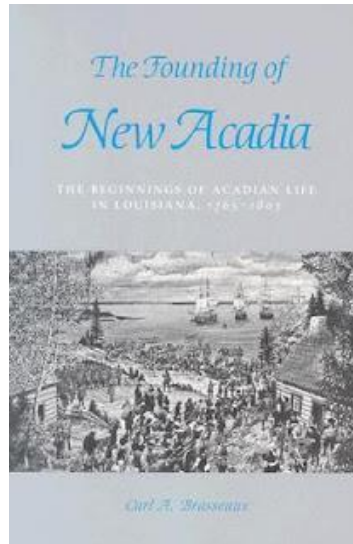


One of Barry Jean Ancelet's books.

Indeed, the rise of CODOFIL is properly viewed not as a localized south Louisiana event that occurred in a vacuum, but as part of a national upsurge in ethnic pride and empowerment taking its cue from the Black-led civil rights movement. As I wrote in *Americanization*:

[T]he 1960s . . . exerted a major impact on ethnic groups across America. A new “Age of Ethnicity” developed in reaction to the Anglo-conformism of previous times, as minorities demanded their rights and honored their heritage. This trend grew out of the civil rights and black power movements, as well as the counterculture, all of which had declared war on traditional attitudes. . . . By 1970 *Newsweek* declared “ethnic power” a “rising cry” among the American people.⁽¹⁷⁾

A remarkable irony, however, is that while no primary-source evidence exists of White “French Louisiana elites” conspiring in the late 1960s per CODOFIL or any other organization to exclude Creoles of African heritage, there *is* evidence of Creole elites excluding Cajuns *from their society*.



Brasseaux's 1987 book,
The Founding of New Acadia.

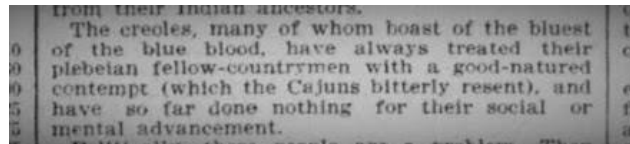
These were 19th-century White Creoles, but Creoles nonetheless. As historian Carl A. Brasseaux observed in *The Founding of New Acadia: The Beginnings of Acadian Life in Louisiana*, “Creole-Acadian tensions were compounded . . . by the [Creole] aristocracy’s growing conviction that its less affluent and less ambitious neighbors were a crass and uncultured people, whose standards of conduct must be altered to meet Creole standards of behavior. . . .” Similarly, educator Shields McIlwaine noted of the Creole attitude toward Cajuns: “[T]he ‘descendants of Evangeline’ . . . had been, as Cable said, ‘the jest of the proud Creole’ — the French aristocracy, who often had a word for the poorer Cajuns: ‘*Canaille!*’ — that was their way of saying poor-white trash.”(18)

This anti-Cajun classism among Creoles is evident in the primary-source record. In 1901, for instance, an observer noted:

There is still a disposition to look with contempt on the Acadian on the part of some. . . . [T]he creole regards it as the greatest indignity to mistake him for an Acadian.(19)

Similarly, in 1898 a journalist affirmed:

The creoles, many of whom boast of the bluest of the blue blood, have always treated their plebeian fellow countrymen [the Cajuns] with a good-natured contempt (which the Cajuns bitterly resent) and have so far done nothing for their social or mental advancement.(20)



(Source: *The Indianapolis Journal*, 28 January 1898.)

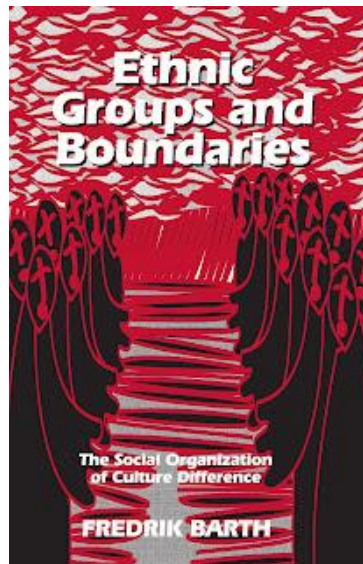
The Yale Literary Magazine remarked in 1889 of a noted Louisiana writer's depiction of Cajuns:

[O]n the faintly undulating prairies of Opelousas, live another people of French ancestry, the descendants of the Acadians who were driven from Nova Scotia. The Creoles look down upon these home-living country-folk. . . .(21)

And an 1881 federal census study maintained (referring overtly to the issue of exclusion):

The Creoles proper will not share their distinction with the native descendants of those worthy Acadian exiles who . . . found refuge in Louisiana. These remain "cadjiens" or "cajuns". . . .(22)

Nevertheless — I contend it is best for all parties to cast off acrimony about one group excluding another. After all, *is it not the very nature of racial and ethnic groups to exclude others?* As pioneer sociologist Fredrik Barth asserted, “[T]he ethnic boundary . . . defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses. . . . [The boundary] entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signalling membership and exclusion” [Barth’s emphasis].(23)



Barth’s 1969 classic study of ethnicity.

Instead, I suggest that Cajuns and Creoles (of all colors) should work together for their mutual benefit, as some have indeed been doing for decades. I urge this even more so because in south Louisiana the word *Creole* often denotes, in its broadest sense, a native-born person of French-speaking, Roman-Catholic heritage, regardless of skin color . . . a description clearly embracing those who identify as Cajuns.

In short, Cajuns *are* Creoles (as I discuss in the first article).



Books about Cajuns
and other types of Creoles.

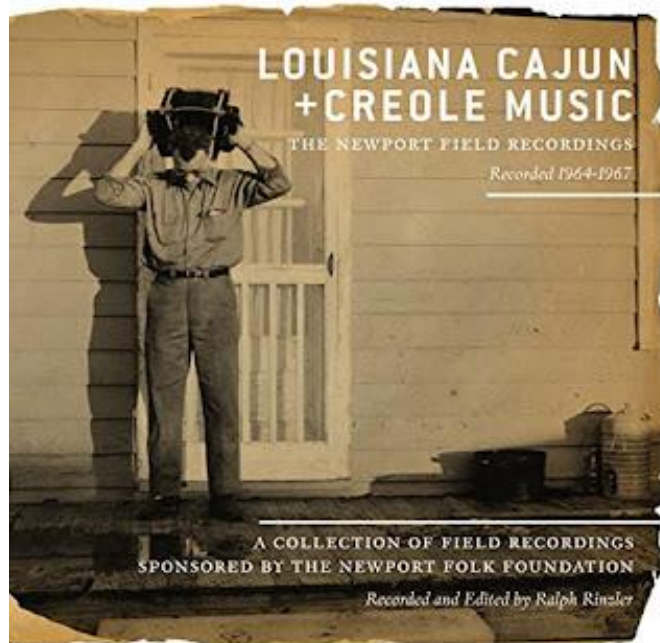
Yet the charge, unsupported by primary-source evidence, that a “French Louisiana elite” conspired against Creoles of African heritage to benefit “a new identity” dubbed “Cajun” raises vital questions for scholars and activists. For instance, cannot Creoles be appreciated, and their language, history, and culture admired (as they ought to be), without denigrating Cajuns? The same Cajuns who for so long have lived among the Creoles, and between whom so much cross-cultural borrowing has occurred, in both directions, that it is impossible to imagine one group without the other?

It similarly might be asked: is it *ever* acceptable for scholars and activists *to advocate* for one racial or ethnic group at the expense of another? I do not mean choosing to study or to devote oneself to one group and not another. Rather, I mean to actively champion one group *by demeaning another*.

Beyond this, however, looms what I consider a much more significant issue: namely, what are the moral implications for scholars and activists who insist that a living, thriving ethnic group — one found in the historical record for over a century and a half — *is illegitimate, even in a sense non-existent*? Who tell a people its dialect is fictitious and thus unworthy of study — or as one of these scholar-activists recently claimed, and rather flippantly at that, “the label ‘Cajun French’ is unsuitable for academic research. . . .”(24)

In today's moral climate, which calls on us to respect professed identities and to spurn attempts at racial and ethnic erasure, is it appropriate to tell Cajuns: "Your label is wrong — your story is untrue — you do not exist"?

Those who seek to advance the study of racial and ethnic groups should, I assert, respect those communities' beliefs — not deride them or, worse, seek to supplant them with their own, perhaps doctrinaire beliefs. The fact of the matter is, there are over a hundred thousand people, largely in south Louisiana and east Texas, who identify as "Cajuns"; and who consider "Cajun French" — a term Ancelet regards as rightly denoting Louisiana French when spoken by Cajuns — as their traditional tongue.⁽²⁵⁾ These proud, self-aware people are not going away, nor are they likely to respond (certainly not affably) to claims they and their dialect are illegitimate and deserving of erasure.



Notes

(1) Christophe Landry, "Basic Louisiana History & The Acadian(A) [sic] Flag Debacle," 15 August 2018, Louisiana Historic & Cultural Vistas, www.mylhcv.com/basic-louisiana-history-the-acadiana-flag-debacle/, accessed 11 May 2022; _____, "Crawfish, Cajuns And Acadians," 4 June 2018, www.mylhcv.com/myth-making-acadians-louisiana-cajuns/, accessed 11 May 2022; Oliver Mayeux, "Language Revitalization, Race, and Resistance in Creole Louisiana," in *Louisiana Creole Peoplehood: Afro-Indigeneity and Community*, ed. Rain Prud'homme-Cranford et al. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022), 144.

See, for example, Jules Bentley, "Blanc Like Me: Cajuns Vs. Whiteness," July 2019, *Antigravity*, antigravitymagazine.com/feature/blanc-like-me-cajuns-vs-whiteness/, accessed 2 May 2022; Alexandra Giancarlo, "'Don't Call Me a Cajun!': Race and Representation in Louisiana's Acadiana Region," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 36, No. 1 (2018): 23-48, accessed per: www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08873631.2018.1500088, 14 September 2020; Nicholas Adam Tate, "Cultural Commodification, Homogenization, Exclusion, and the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana," master's thesis, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Spring 2021, www.proquest.com/openview/aca17bafcf3d2682bceb89e206843ef2, accessed 23 May 2022.

See also my essay "Thoughts on Cajuns and 'Whiteness,'" blog article in this volume.

Interestingly, Tate concluded that "There is no evidence in the CODOFIL archives to suggest that CODOFIL intentionally sought to exclude Creoles of Color from the Louisiana French Movement or from participating in programs or policies." Rather, Tate asserts that CODOFIL unintentionally excluded Creoles of African heritage who, however, "also excluded themselves as a means to maintain their distinct culture and francophone identity." Tate, "Cultural Commodification," 59, 69.

(2) Cécyle Trépanier, “The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity,” *The Geographical Journal* 157 (July 1991): 164.

Trépanier drew heavily on the work of Eric Waddell. See E. Waddell, “La Louisiane française: une poste outre-frontière de l’Amérique française ou un autre pays et une autre culture?” *Cahiers de géographie du Québec* 23 (September 1979): 199–215, accessed per the website of the International DOI [Digital Object Identifier] Foundation, doi.org/10.7202/021434ar, 29 April 2022.

I disagree with Trépanier’s broad assertion that “the beautification of the Cajun identity began to take place in the late 1960s” (p. 161). What began to take place in the 1960s was the rise of Cajun pride and empowerment *as a movement*. Prior to that decade, however, Cajun identity (which long predated the 1960s) had never been viewed uniformly as sullied and therefore in need of “beautification.” As I note elsewhere, early appearances of the word *Cajun* “include not only negative, but neutral and positive occurrences” (despite occasional present-day claims that *Cajun* had been used solely as a negative term prior to the late 1960s). Thus we see positive historic declarations such as “Cadiens . . . the true name of this valiant population” (1877) and “those worthy Acadian exiles who . . . [are called] ‘cadjien’ or ‘cadjuns’ . . .” (1881). (This partly explains why we find more than one or two U.S. aircraft in World War II bearing the loving nickname *Cajun* on their fuselages — about a quarter-century before Trépanier claims the identity it stood for began to be beautified.) See my essay “Notes on the Birth of Cajun Ethnic Identity,” blog article in this volume.

(3) Mayeux, “Language Revitalization,” 147.

(4) “The ‘Cajuns’ of Louisiana,” *Dallas (Tex.) News*, reprinted in *The Indianapolis Journal*, 28 January 1898, 7; “The Acadians: A Picturesque People Unchanged by Time,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, reprinted in *The Abbeville (S.C.) Press and Banner*, 29 June 1887, 7; “Acts Hereafter Only in English,” *The (Opelousas, La.) Star-Progress*, 18 May 1921, 2.



The *Little Cajun* in WWII,
a literal homage to Cajun beauty.
(Source: author's collection)

Some critics might assert that while, yes, the word “Cajun” did exist in abundance between the 1860s and the late 1960s, it was never used as *an ethnic label*, only as a *classist term for all poor white French-speakers regardless of ethnicity*. Such classist usage does exist in the historical record, but so do many clear instances of “Cajun” as an ethnic label. An 1898 source, for example, described Cajuns as “the descendants of the exiled Acadians”; an 1881 source called them “the native descendants of those worthy Acadian exiles”; and so on. Thus, to assert that “Cajun” was never used early on as an ethnic label is false. See T. W. Poole, *Some Late Words about Louisiana* (New Orleans: E. Marchand, 1889), 26; George E. Waring Jr. and George W. Cable, *History and Present Condition of New Orleans, Louisiana: Social Statistics of Cities, Tenth Census of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1881), 10.

Regarding this same topic of Cajun ethnicity, historian Carl A. Brasseaux notes, “Eighteenth-century writers — and mainstream historians of the past 150 years — have clearly established that the French colonists of the Bay of Fundy Basin had forged a new, collective ethnic identity as Acadians long before their expulsion from Canada in 1755. . . . During the ensuing years of exile and wandering, the Acadians were universally regarded by their

reluctant hosts as a distinct people with a common ethnic identity. That identity clearly remained intact after successive waves of surviving Acadians made their way to Louisiana between 1764 and 1788. At the time of their arrival and for decades afterward, the exiles' ethnicity was clearly and unequivocally recognized by established Louisianians, including proto-Creoles, who clearly viewed the immigrants as the 'other.' Indeed, as low-class, insolent, and often combative interlopers. The resulting acrimonious relationship between the two groups, based on socio-economic, linguistic, cultural differences and divergent, incompatible world views remained intact as the two groups evolved and matured side-by-side in southern Louisiana over the following two-and-a-half centuries. Ethnic identities remained stable even as ethnic labels changed in response to the region's evolving general linguistic landscape, in which *Acadien* (ca. 1764) morphed into *Cadien* (ca. 1770-ca. 1850), and, finally, *Cajun* (ca. 1850). . . . Contemporary writers clearly recognized that the two communities were separate and distinct throughout this evolutionary process. This does not mean that, after centuries of evolutionary adaptation to the same physical and cultural landscapes, there were not similarities. . . ." Carl A. Brasseaux, Lafayette, La., to Shane K. Bernard, New Iberia, La., 9 May 2022, email correspondence in the possession of Shane K. Bernard.



A 1955 ad for a New Iberia restaurant:
"Cajun ethnicity did not suddenly materialize
from nothingness after CODOFIL's birth in 1968."
(Source: author's collection)

(5) Nor is it a case of “Cajuns” suddenly “becoming White” in 1968 or thereafter. With very few exceptions (and there are a few), historical primary-source documents refer to the Cajuns and their Acadian ancestors as “White.” See Bernard, “Cajuns and ‘Whiteness,’” blog article in this volume.

Those asserting a recent Cajun ethnogenesis fondly quote an anonymous Creole elder of Breaux Bridge who once averred, “We were called Creoles before this Cajun business” — as though this statement, subject to interpretation, were a self-evident absolute truth, unopposed by various other sources, including the memories of the Cajun people themselves. (The “we” in this quotation has been variously interpreted to mean either “Creoles of African descent” or, more broadly, “all Creoles, regardless of skin color or heritage.” Rendered in its original tongue, the statement is “*On s’appelait des Creoles avant cette affaire de Cadjin.*”)

See Trépanier, “Cajunization,” 167.

(6) Jacques Henry, “From *Acadien* to *Cajun* to *Cadien*: Ethnic Labelization and Construction of Identity,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 17 (Summer, 1998): 29-62.

(7) Minutes, CODOFIL Meeting, 27 October 1968, TD, Clyde L. Rougeou Papers, University of Louisiana at Lafayette Archives, Dupré Library, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, La

(8) Barry Jean Ancelet, Scott, La., to Shane K. Bernard, New Iberia, La., 6 May 2022, email correspondence in the possession of Shane K. Bernard.

(9) Shane K. Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 126-27.

(10) Barry Jean Ancelet, “From Evangeline Hot Sauce to Cajun Ice: Signs of Ethnicity in South Louisiana,” *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany*, 1996, reprinted on *Folklife in Louisiana*, www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/main_misc_hot_sauce.html, accessed 30 April 2022; Bernard, *Americanization*, 113.

(11) Bernard, *Americanization*, 112-13.

(12) Mayeux, “Language Revitalization,” 146. One should not, like Mayeux, confuse CODOFIL president James R. Domengeaux [1907-1988] with his nephew James H. Domengeaux [1959-]. It was

the latter, the nephew, who wrote the *Louisiana Law Review* article “Native-Born Acadians and the Equality Ideal,” which asserted that pre-existing state and federal laws protect Cajuns from ethnic discrimination. See James Harvey Domengeaux, “Native-Born Acadians and the Equality Ideal,” *Louisiana Law Review* 46 (July 1986): 1151-1195, accessible at digitalcommons.law.lsu.edu/lalrev/vol46/iss6/3.

According to Ancelet, CODOFIL president James R. Domengeaux actually had no middle name, but at some point began to be attributed as “James R. Domengeaux,” which had in fact been his father’s name (the middle initial standing for “Rudolph”). James Domengeaux obituary, 12 April 1988, “United States, GenealogyBank Obituaries, 1980-2014,” FamilySearch.org, familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QKRT-K28B, accessed 1 May 2022; Barry Jean Ancelet, Scott, La., to Shane K. Bernard, New Iberia, La., 27 April 2022, email correspondence in the possession of Shane K. Bernard.

(13) Bernard, *Americanization*, 88-89, 98-99.

(14) Minutes, CODOFIL Meeting; Barry Jean Ancelet, Scott, La., to Shane K. Bernard, New Iberia, La., 20 April 2022, email correspondence in the possession of Shane K. Bernard; Barry Jean Ancelet, Scott, La., to Shane K. Bernard, New Iberia, La., 26 April 2022, email correspondence in the possession of Shane K. Bernard.

(15) Bernard, *Americanization*, 58, 74, 77.

(16) Barry Jean Ancelet, Scott, La., to Shane K. Bernard, New Iberia, La., 5 May 2022, email correspondence in the possession of Shane K. Bernard.

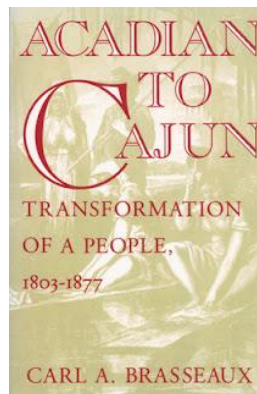
(17) Bernard, *Americanization*, 87.

(18) Carl A. Brasseaux, *The Founding of New Acadia: The Beginnings of Acadian Life in Louisiana, 1765-1803* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 176; Shields McIlwaine, *The Southern Poor-White from Lubberland to Tobacco Road* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), 143 (italics added for the French *canaille*).

I do not touch in the main text on Creole-on-Creole classism, a form of discrimination Brasseaux mentions, much less Creole

enslavement of other Creoles — including Creoles of African descent enslaving other Creoles of African descent. For discussion of Creole-on-Creole classism, see Carl A. Brasseaux, *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803-1877* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 151-52; Carl A. Brasseaux, *French, Cajun, Creole, Houma: A Primer on Francophone Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 102-3, 104-5. For discussion of Creole enslavement of Creoles, see Shane K. Bernard, *Teche: A History of Louisiana's Most Famous Bayou* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 66; Carl A. Brasseaux, Keith P. Fontenot, and Claude F. Oubre, *Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 71-2, passim.

In 2014 one scholar observed, “[I]t is worth noting that many Creoles of Color consider themselves socially superior to Cajuns. And the French of New Orleans (who are often called white Creoles or simply Creoles), they think themselves superior to Creoles of Color and also Cajuns. Several elderly informants have also told me that some years ago—around the 1940s—the New Orleans French and the Creoles of Color both refused to socialize with Cajuns.” James Etienne Viator, “Kreyol-Ye, Kaden-Ye, e Lalwa a Langaj dan Lalwizyann [Creoles, Cajuns, and Law and Language in Louisiana],” *Loyola Law Review* 60 (2014): 294.



Brasseaux's 1992 study
of Cajun ethnicity.

(19) “Louisiana Is White,” *The (Phoenix, Ariz.) Arizona Republican*, 19 August 1901, 1.

(20) “Louisiana Acadians,” *The Paducah Daily Sun*, 26 January 1898, 2; see also “The ‘Cajuns’ of Louisiana,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, 28 January 1898, 7.

(21) George A. Hurd, “The Louisiana of Cable,” *The Yale Literary Magazine*, April 1889, 307.

(22) George E. Waring Jr. and George W. Cable, *History and Present Condition of New Orleans, Louisiana: Social Statistics of Cities, Tenth Census of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior/U.S. Government Printing Office, 1881), 10.

(23) Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Waveland Press, 1998), 15.

(24) Mayeux, “Language Revitalization,” 147.

(25) The 2020 national count for persons identifying in whole or part as “Cajun” was 107,553.

In the late 1980s, however, Brasseaux estimated Louisiana’s Cajun population at 500,000 to 700,000 — figures that approximate the findings of the 1990 census, in which 432,549 Louisianians and 668,271 persons nationwide (including Louisiana) identified their heritage as “Acadian.” (I cite the 1990 U.S. Census here because it is the census whose data I analyzed for my 2000 dissertation, which became my 2003 *Americanization* book.)

For the purposes of this article, however, I adhere to the more conservative 2020 estimate, which counted respondents specifically identifying as “Cajun” (not “Acadian” as with the 1990 census).

“Cajun,” People Reporting Ancestry, 2020: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables (B04006), Total U.S. Population, data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=United%20States&t=Ancestry&tid=ACSDT5Y2020.B04006, accessed 2 May 2021; Brasseaux, *Founding of New Acadia*, 1; 1990 U.S. Census of Population; Barry Jean Ancelet, Scott, La., to Shane K. Bernard, New

Iberia, La., 11 April 2022, email correspondence in the possession of Shane K. Bernard.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shane K. Bernard holds degrees in English and History from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and a doctorate in History from Texas A&M University. For over thirty years he has served as historian and curator to McIlhenny Company, maker of world-famous TABASCO® Brand Products, and its sister organization, Avery Island Inc. He lives in New Iberia, Louisiana, a short distance from the celebrated Bayou Teche.

Bernard's books include:

Teche: A History of Louisiana's Most Famous Bayou (2016)

Cajuns and Their Acadian Ancestors: A Young Reader's History (2008)

TABASCO: An Illustrated History (2007)

The Cajuns: Americanization of a People (2003)

Swamp Pop: Cajun and Creole Rhythm and Blues (1996)